

powwow

{pow'-wow}

A powwow is a communal celebration among North American Indians. Lasting from one day to a week or more, the powwow is characterized by dancing, displays of crafts and arts, and traditional tribal dress.

The derivation of powwow—from the Algonquian "he dreams," suggesting communication with the dream or spirit world—shows that powwows had their origin in religious ceremonies, and some religious powwows are still held. In times of crisis or on other important occasions, powwows were held to unite minds and spirits for the common good. Prayer, dance, and song commemorated the dead, sought to expel sickness, celebrated manhood, renewed friendships, or expressed hope for a lasting peace. Speeches, games, pipe smoking, and gift giving also characterized these councils, sings, or dances, as powwows were sometimes called.

The dispersion, decimation, and restriction of American Indians during the 19th century, combined with ACCULTURATION and the consequent lapsing of traditional ways, resulted in secularization of powwows. As this secularization occurred, however, a united Indian movement, or Pan-Indianism, began to emerge among the Plains Indians, with their powwows serving as unifying mechanisms. Today powwows continue to reinforce tribal identity and promote tribal and Pan-Indian solidarity.

James W. Herrick

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